

REBIRTH
(THE ROME'S REVOLUTION SAGA:
BOOK 1 OF 3)

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REBIRTH
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Preface

This story is true. It just hasn't happened yet.

Prologue

Year 3455 AD

**Location: Sixth Planet, Tabit (Pi³ Orionis) System
(26 Light Years from Earth)**

Rei Bierak felt the legs of his all-white pressure suit stiffen as the air in the hangar rushed out to mix with the thin, unbreathable atmosphere of the moon called Dara. The dirt swirled around the hangar entrance in tiny eddies, like miniature dust devils. In his right hand, Rei clutched a metal briefcase filled with dormant VIRUS units that were possibly the most destructive force in the galaxy. Although he was anxious to get started, he had to wait a moment for the pressure inside the hangar to equilibrate with the outside.

Finally, Rei took his first step onto the surface of the moon where he had been living inside a habitat for the last several days. The soil was crunchy, not dusty as he would have guessed. Looking down at his boots, it hit him. He was finally setting foot on an alien world for the first time. Back on Earth, just before the Ark II had launched, he had tried to visualize his first exo-step. He assumed it would be on the planet where he would be making his new home. Yet here he was, a 25 year-old man from the 21st century, stuck in the 35th century, in a star system 26 light years from Earth on a world about to be destroyed. In fact, it was his job to destroy not only this moon but to set into motion a series of events that would eventually take out the entire star system along with it.

He looked up and out. Dara, the moon, was unremarkable in every way. The soil was brown and drab. It looked nothing like the surface of a typical moon. Rei saw signs of erosion everywhere. Dara had enough atmosphere to slow down meteors and enough wind and weather to smooth out all but the newest craters. It certainly didn't have the stark beauty of Earth's Moon or the startling contrast of shapes and colors of Mars.

Rei breathed in sharply through his nose; however, all he could smell was the purified air of the pressure suit mixed with his own perspiration. Trying to breathe the air here would have killed him rather quickly. He took two more steps forward then turned to his right and began his long trek south.

Based upon OMCOM's estimate, Rei figured he should probably walk about 1000 paces away from the habitat before releasing the VIRUS nanobots. That would give him more than enough time to return to the space tug. He would be able to lift off and rendezvous with the Ark II long before the nanobots consumed Dara.

Ahead of Rei, Dara's parent, the gas giant known as Skyler's World, dominated the horizon. It filled nearly one-third of the heavens above. In stark contrast to the muted, dreary appearance of Dara, the Jupiter-class planet shone brightly with its gaudy bands of chocolate brown and aqua, white, turquoise, azure and streaks of red. Skyler's World was so large it would have most likely developed into a star or brown dwarf some day but now it would never get the chance. Even the mighty Skyler's World would not survive the hell that Rei was about to unleash.

Inside his helmet, Rei counted his paces out loud in a vain attempt to avoid considering his predicament. To further distract himself, he searched the sky overhead. He was trying to spot the Ark II, the spaceship that had brought him here to the Tabit system which was silently orbiting Dara with 539 of his fellow colonists aboard. Rei envied his frozen peers, fast asleep in cryo-hibernation. They were blissfully unaware of

the dire nature of their circumstances and the thing that was rapidly barreling down on them. Thinking about it made him pick up his tempo.

At 900 paces, Rei felt the ground shake. There was no slow buildup. The vibrations were abrupt and more violent than an ordinary moonquake but subsided quickly. He turned and looked back at the habitat. Rising majestically above the rounded pyramid of the station was the flagship of the Vuduri fleet, the starship *Algol*, pounding the dirt and whipping up the dust with its powerful EG lifters. The all-white spaceship flew forward, away from Rei, and then executed a slow bank right, coming around until it was headed in his direction.

Unlike his *Ark II* which was constructed as a series of long flattened cylinders, the *Algol* was far more graceful, about half the length of the *Ark*. The *Algol* was sleek and streamlined. With its huge thruster pods poised at the end of each airfoil, it was clearly designed to operate both in space and within an atmosphere.

As the starship flew over his head, it wagged its wings. Rei raised his free hand to acknowledge the gesture. At the helm of the ship was his beloved Rome, the Vuduri woman he had met when he first arrived here. Despite the brevity of Rei's stay, they had fallen deeply in love with each other. Rei knew Rome had no choice but to pilot the *Algol* back to Earth by herself since she was the only member of the Vuduri people who remained conscious, leaving Rei behind. He stood by helplessly as the massive ship rose up into the air. After a short time, he saw the plasma thrusters ignite and the *Algol* took off straight up like a rocket. With tears in his eyes, Rei watched the spaceship gain altitude. The craft dwindled in size, first to a tiny speck then finally disappearing into space.

Grief-stricken, Rei sank to his knees and sobbed uncontrollably. His beautiful Rome, the love of his life, was gone, never to return. At this point, Rei was as alone as any human being could ever be. Without Rome, it seemed like he had no reason to live. His heart was broken but his sense of duty still haunted him. His frozen comrades in the *Ark II* above were depending upon him to tow them out of the Tabit system and on to Tau Ceti, their original target, before the destruction began. Like Rome, Rei really didn't have a choice. He forced himself to stand and get on with the task of destroying a world.

Rei scanned the area immediately in front of him. He spotted a suitable crater about a hundred yards ahead. As he trudged forward, the finality of his mission pressed down on him, forcing him to wonder how he got here. How did it come to this? Rei shook his head as the events of the prior few days came flooding back to him...

Chapter 1

(Three days earlier)

Rei Bierak was jarred awake from his cryo-hibernation by a searing pain shooting through his chest. The automatic defibrillator had just fired off a 300-joule pulse, erroneously trying to restart his already-beating heart. The cardiac sensors glued to his torso had degraded over time meaning the unsuspecting control microprocessor had no clue that its previous work had actually been successful. Even though Rei's ears were filled with gloppy green rehydration fluid, he could still hear the high-pitched whine of the resonance coils charging up for a third and final attempt at reviving him. He realized he had to get the defibrillator pads off of his chest or the very piece of equipment that was supposed to save his life was going to kill him instead. With a titanic effort, he lifted his right arm and clawed at one of the flexible leads, ripping it away just before the circuit tripped. A spark jumped the gap, burning Rei's fingers in the process but he knew that was a small price to pay when compared to being dead.

The motion of Rei moving his arm to pull off the defib pad acted like a fireplace bellows forcing him to draw in a deep breath of frigid air into lungs that hadn't been used in several centuries, which was a good thing. It didn't concern Rei that his eyes felt like they were glued shut. He figured he was now safe and had time to consider his situation. He was hermetically sealed inside a cryo-hibernation chamber called a sarcophagus, soaked in a liquid that was used to preserve him during the long trip to the stars. It was freezing cold but the mere fact that the resuscitation sequence had been engaged could only mean that the Ark II had arrived at its target, the star system known as Tau Ceti. Despite his clogged ears feeling like they were stuffed with cotton, Rei attempted to attend to the other softer sounds issuing from within the sarcophagus. He heard the quiet whirring of the fluid pumps as they sucked the liquid out of his chamber. He felt the heaters blowing warm air across his body as they endeavored to bring his core temperature up from hypothermia to normal. He could feel the nourishing heat emanating from the thorium rods mounted beneath his chamber warming up his back side. It felt good. His brain may have been fuzzy from all the drugs they had given him prior to being frozen but enough of it worked for him to suss out what was happening.

A peculiar scraping noise caught Rei's attention which he immediately recognized as the sound of the cover of his sarcophagus being drawn back. He was saved! But before Rei could take much comfort in that thought, a blinding light bathed his face, penetrating his closed eyelids. Reflexively, he flung his arm over his eyes to block out the glare. He barely felt the two cardiac sensors and the other defibrillator pad being peeled away from his bare chest. He pulled his arm back and with a Herculean effort, forced his eyes open. The dazzling spotlights blasted him. He blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the light. He was rewarded by now being able to see shapes and shadows crossing back and forth in front of him. One of the shapes drew near and an irresistible force lifted him up, enabling him to sit in an upright position. Rei tried to hold his head up but his neck lacked its usual muscle tone so his head drooped down until his chin rested upon his chest. Rei felt a soft material sliding over his feet then drawn up to the tops of his thighs which were resting on the edge of the sarcophagus.

Rei took another deep breath, forcing his eyes upward. Two bright shapes stood out against a dark background. Rei found squinting helped bring them into focus. To his

horror, he realized these were not his crewmates helping to awaken him, but rather bizarre alien creatures. Bipedal with two arm-like appendages, dressed all in white, they sported huge bulbous heads with piercing beams of light shining from either side. Rei tried to shy away from their inhuman touch but he was simply too weak to pull free.

Eventually, reason prevailed. Rei thought to himself that if they intended to kill him, they would have done so already. They certainly wouldn't try and dress him. He closed his eyes again and forced himself to relax. Gently, the two beings coaxed him to his feet. They helped Rei insert his arms into the two sleeves. After they fastened the final clasp across the top, Rei opened his eyes and looked at them more carefully.

"Who are you?" he asked in a voice that was raspy from disuse.

Neither of the creatures reacted. As he stared at them, Rei recognized they might not be creatures at all. Their white clothing resembled a soft form-fitting spacesuit and the bright lights were basically lamps attached to either side of their helmets. He couldn't make out their faces which were cast deep in shadow. One of the people stood slightly taller than the other. Rei noted that the one on the right, the shorter one, had a distinctly feminine figure.

Rei allowed them to drape his long arms across their shoulders. They took one step and then another then stopped as Rei's knees started to buckle. This made no sense because wherever they were, the gravity here was far less than one g. He grabbed his rescuers tightly and forced himself to stand tall. The musculature of the one on the left was firm and solid. The one on the right, the more feminine one, felt softer.

Seeing that he was now steady, they started forward again. After a few more steps, Rei asked, "Where are you taking me?" As before, there was no answer. Perhaps they couldn't hear him inside their helmets.

Slowly but surely, the three of them walked across the floor to a bed. Perhaps gurney would be a better term. They laid Rei down and covered him with a thin white blanket. The mattress seemed to be some sort of memory foam. It shaped itself to the contours of his body as he settled back. It was very comfortable.

Just the effort of walking maybe ten feet was enough to exhaust Rei. The disturbing unknown of the who and the where would have to wait. In the back of his mind, he found it vaguely ironic that he had just awakened from what had to be centuries of cryo-hibernation and now all he wanted to do was sleep. He would have to solve the mystery of his circumstances later on. Within seconds, Rei fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Rei was rudely awakened by a sharp prick on the back of his right hand. He opened his eyes just in time to see a needle withdrawing from his skin. The syringe disappeared inside a metallic cylinder positioned by the side of his bed. Rei wiped a droplet of blood that appeared at the puncture point with his left hand and started to sit up. As he did so, a burning bolt of pain traveled from the bottom of his spine to the base of his neck, causing him to cry out.

"What the hell was that?" he muttered to himself after it subsided. He'd never had back problems in his life. Carefully, Rei swung his legs around and placed his feet on the ground. He looked down and noted that his feet were now encased in a pair of soft white

slippers or moccasins. The white jumpsuit they had dressed him in was too tight. He longed for his regular tan flight suit which would have been so much more comfortable.

Having assessed his personal situation, Rei looked around the room. On the far wall, to the left of his sarcophagus, he noted a large picture window which overlooked a cavernous hangar. A stark white aircraft or spaceship sat nestled in the middle of the hangar. It reminded Rei of a boxier version of the long-retired Space Shuttle.

He looked to his right. The featureless, all-white wall was unremarkable with the exception of a soft white glow emanating from its surface. He looked up. The ceiling was also white and glowing. Apparently, there was no single light source here but rather the room itself supplied the illumination. Rei rotated his head farther to the right and spied a bulkhead with a large porthole on the near wall.

He took one step toward the door and was rewarded by another wave of pain traveling up his back, a pain so intense it made him stagger. Rei determined that despite the lower gravity, lifting his legs was too risky. Instead of walking normally, he slowly slid one foot then another, shuffling along until he got to the door. Looking up, he was startled to see a face staring back at him. He jumped back and once again, pain shot through his spine, only slightly less intense this time. The face on the other side of the porthole was female with long dark hair. She looked familiar and exotic at the same time and if he didn't know better, he'd swear her eyes were glowing.

Rei took another slide step toward the door. "Hello," he said. The woman did not react. He had no clue if sound even traveled through the door. He shouted "Hello!" again, waving his arms. The motion of his efforts spooked her and she took a step back away from the bulkhead.

"Can you hear me?" Rei called out. The woman stared into his eyes for a moment longer then turned and walked away. She quickly disappeared out of sight.

"Damn it," Rei said as he slumped against the door. "Anybody?"

A disembodied voice rang out from his right. **"Based upon your words and intonation, there is a 94% probability that you speak mid-21st century English. Is this correct?"**

"Who are you? Where are you?" Rei asked, looking around desperately.

"Engaging personality module. Please wait..."

The voice changed in tenor and cadence. "You may call me OMCOM. As far as my location is concerned, I am a distributed intelligence but to answer your specific question, the voice you hear emits from the grille mounted over by your bedside."

"Distributed intelligence? Personality module. You're a computer?"

"That is an adequate description for purposes of discussion."

Rei gauged the distance between where he stood and the edge of the bed. Based upon the amount of pain he experienced, it looked about a half a mile away. Nonetheless, slowly and carefully, he shuffled his way back over to his bed. Facing the nearest wall he became aware of all sorts of monitors and readouts that he hadn't noticed before.

"Where am I?" Rei asked, searching for the grille. "Where are we? And where is the rest of my crew?"

"Allow me to give you a brief orientation," OMCOM said. One of the monitors lit up with dots and circles with a star chart as a backdrop. "You are currently standing in an airlock which has been configured to serve as an isolation chamber. This entire habitat is located on a moon called Dara which orbits a gas giant. In your language, you would call the parent Skyler's World."

“So where is that? Where are we?” Rei asked, tilting his head, trying to make sense of the display.

“Skyler’s World circles a star called Tabit also known as Pi^3 Orionis located 26.18 light years from Earth.”

“What!?” Rei gasped. “26 light years? We were supposed to go to Tau Ceti. Where is Tau Ceti?”

On the display, OMCOM constructed a downward facing right triangle consisting of three dots and three lines. The rightmost dot glowed bright yellow. The bottom dot was orange and the leftmost dot flickered with a light colored blue. The yellow dot started flashing.

“The blinking yellow symbol is the Solar System. The orange one is Tau Ceti which is approximately 12 light years distant.” The lower dot and the line connecting them started blinking as well. “The leftmost dot is Tabit.” The first two dots froze and now the only thing blinking was the pale blue indicator. “As I mentioned before Tabit is 26 light years from Earth and approximately 21 light years from Tau Ceti.”

Rei tilted his head. “So how’d we get here? Wait. What year is this?”

“By your calendar, it would be the year 3455.”

“What?!” Rei shook his head, trying to clear it. “You mean we’ve been asleep for 14 centuries?”

“Apparently.”

“Then how... we...” Rei’s voice trailed off as he tried to comprehend the whole picture. The sedatives in his bloodstream had nearly worn off but the rapid influx of data made it no less hard to focus. Rei lifted his hands at the wrist as if in a motion to stop the onslaught of information. He took a deep breath to compose himself. He looked up at the monitor again trying to formulate his next question. OMCOM preempted that attempt.

“This is the first time I have activated my personality module,” OMCOM said. “Feedback indicates I should ask you your name in order to strengthen my perceived bond with you. What is your name?”

“My name? My name is Rei Bierak,” Rei said, relieved to be considering something more trivial than the cosmic nightmare in front of him. “It’s spelled Rei but pronounced like a ray of sunshine. It’s short for Reinard.”

“Very well, Rei, what is the name of your ship?”

“My ship? Oh. It’s called the Ark II.”

“How many passengers are aboard your Ark II?”

“543, well, 542 plus me,” Rei answered.

“And what is your mission?”

“Our mission *was* to go to Tau Ceti. To land there. To live there.”

“Based upon the visual evidence, this is most likely no longer an option,” OMCOM said with what sounded like a hint of remorse.

“What do you mean?” Rei asked with trepidation.

OMCOM answered by clearing the star chart and lighting up the main display with an image of a large silvery object floating in space. “This is an image of the front section of your ship taken when we first towed it into orbit around Dara.”

Rei carefully leaned over the bed so that he could be closer to the display. He watched as the camera swung around to the front of the ship.

“Holy Mother of Christ,” Rei exclaimed. “The whole command section and SSTO booster is gone. What the hell happened?” He just stared at the screen and the ragged edges at the front of his vessel. To Rei, it looked like his ship had been ripped apart.

“Our transport found your vessel tumbling in all three axes. It would appear that this motion was most likely the residual momentum imparted by whatever caused the front section to be removed.”

“Did we hit something? Was there an explosion?” Rei asked.

“I have no data regarding the underlying cause. Perhaps a more detailed inspection of your spacecraft may ascertain that information.”

“Do you think the ship can still fly?” Rei asked. “Can you repair it?”

“To within three deltas, I compute a negative. Your command and control systems are gone. They would have to be replaced. What was your method of propulsion?”

“Um. Uh, we used the Grey Drive.”

“I am not familiar with the Grey Drive. Can you describe its operation?”

Rei scratched his head trying to stimulate the remaining portions of his brain which seemed to still be asleep. “From what I understand,” he said, “the Grey Drive uses a quantum black hole to consume xenon atoms which then emit Hawking radiation. The radiation is focused in a resonant cavity chamber which creates thrust in a vacuum.”

“This base does not have the resources to create a quantum black hole so that would rule out repairing your star-drive.”

“Then what about my crew? Are you going to bring them down here?”

“That would not be possible.”

“Why not?” Rei whined.

“This stellar cartography base was designed to hold 80 people. We would have neither the room nor the resources to support that many of your peers.”

“Well, you said we were on a moon. Forget your base. What about somewhere else?”

“The moon we occupy is not suitable for human habitation in the sense you require. For one thing, the atmosphere is far too thin and contains no oxygen. And to answer your next question, there are no planets in the habitable zone of the Tabit star system.”

By this point, Rei felt queasy, his head throbbing. His knees were becoming wobbly and it felt like the ground was shaking beneath him. With a start, he realized the ground really was shaking. He grabbed a hold of the gurney.

“What’s going on?” Rei called out as the tremors increased. “It feels like an earthquake.”

“It is,” OMCOM replied calmly. “Dara is very active geologically. We get small tremors here regularly. It is nothing to be alarmed about.”

As quickly as the tremors came on, they diminished and then stopped. Rei turned around and faced away from display. He lowered his head into his hands and spoke through them. “So what’s going to happen to us?”

“That is for the Overmind to decide.”

Rei snapped his head up and turned back around. “What is the Overmind?” he asked tentatively. His tone indicated he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

“The Overmind is the controlling intellect in charge of the base.”

“Controlling intellect? Is it a computer like you?”

“No. It is organic but it has no physical body. Rather, the Overmind is an autonomous intelligence created by the collective consciousness of all the Vuduri here.”

Rei felt like he was falling down a rabbit hole. “Who or what are the Vuduri?”

“That is the name of the people inhabiting this base. You met two of them earlier today.”

Rei perked up. “Can I talk to one of them?”

“Very soon. We are preparing someone to converse with you even as we speak.”

“What do you mean prepare?”

“The Vuduri do not use spoken language as their primary means of communication. It has largely fallen out of favor. I am instilling a working knowledge of your words and syntax into the candidate.”

“Wait. If they don’t speak, how do they communicate? Do they use sign language?”

Rei shook his head and laughed. “Or do they just read each other’s minds?”

“Actually, yes,” OMCOM replied.

“What?!” Rei sputtered. “But how...”

OMCOM immediately interrupted him. “It would be best if you hold your remaining questions in abeyance until we can provide a more suitable forum. In the meantime, based upon our historical records, I was instructed to ascertain if you were harboring any harmful disease entities before you were allowed contact with any of the inhabitants of the base. I have completed my tests and I have determined that you are free of infection. The quarantine period is now over.”

“Good,” Rei replied. It felt like a tiny victory, one that should be celebrated. “Hey, can I have some water?” he asked.

“Of course,” OMCOM answered. A previously hidden plate built into the wall slid back. Within the cavity sat a squeeze-bulb filled with water. Just as Rei was reaching for it, the bulkhead to his left opened with a loud hissing sound. A figure dressed all in white entered the room.

Chapter 2

Rei found himself sitting on the gurney with his back against the instrumentation panel. He had been instructed to do so by OMCOM while the Vuduri woman regarded him. She was standing about six feet away, hands on her hips. She kept looking at him up and down as if she were trying to draw a deeper understanding of Rei's essence just by his appearance.

While she was staring at Rei, Rei was staring at her. He recognized her as the one who had peered at him earlier through the porthole. The woman was tiny, at most five feet tall, wearing a white jumpsuit similar to the one Rei had on. Her beautiful, shoulder-length, dark brown hair had hints of gold throughout. Her eyes were very dark as well. Her skin had an olive tint to it. She had an athletic build, but it was distinctly feminine, bordering on spectacular.

At last, she nodded. Rei thought that was a signal for him to stand but the woman held up her hand so Rei remained sitting. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then opened her eyes again and said in a clear voice, "Halli. Au siu Rome." Her voice had a lilting, musical quality about it.

From behind Rei, OMCOM said, "Hello. I am Rome."

The woman bent her head to look around Rei at OMCOM's grille then back to Rei and said, "I am Rome."

She took another deep breath and continued, "Ver-ma-e axema ta um shird quanti bere etquoror sue longue." Her voice, especially her intonation was familiar to Rei, but he had no idea why.

OMCOM spoke again, "It will take me a short while to acquire your language."

"It weel take eme a short while du ack," Rome said.

"Acquire," OMCOM offered.

"Du acquire your language," Rome repeated the phrase.

Rei nodded as if he understood but he really didn't. "OMCOM, what's going on here?" he asked.

"Your version of English has not been spoken in hundreds of years. While Rome is an accomplished linguist for a Vuduri, she must actually speak the words and have me correct them out loud a few times before she can pronounce them in your dialect."

"Nei ma vere axema ta um dambi lingi," Rome said.

OMCOM translated. "It will not take me a long time."

"It will nei, not, take me a long dambi, time," Rome repeated. Her accent sounded vaguely Mediterranean.

Rei was surprised. "How can you learn my language so quickly? How are you doing this in the first place?"

"IMCOM," she said, placing two fingers on her temple.

"OMCOM?" Rei asked.

Rome nodded.

"You mean OMCOM is inside your head as well?"

"Som," she said.

"Yes," OMCOM corrected her then to Rei, he said, "Rome has acquired nearly 90% of your base language to this point."